

ECONOMY

On tattoos and development

BILL DAY

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On top of the soul-searching the city is doing in the wake of the San Antonio Symphony's bankruptcy, we're about to get another lesson in how much we need culture to keep the city vibrant.

This Wednesday, the city hosts a seminar called "Finding Ways" that will explore links between cultural vibrancy and economic development.

It'll be more than just an advertisement for the good things museums and symphonies can bring. The keynote speaker is economist and best-selling writer Richard Florida, whose book "The Rise of the **Creative** Class" outlines how cities with vibrant cultures are doing better than sleepy, laid-back (some would say dull) communities.

Be warned: "Vibrant" doesn't just mean supporting traditional cultural activities like symphonies, museums and festivals. It means tattoo parlors, nightclubs and live music by bands you've never heard of. In short, things that appeal to young adults and their "underground" sensibilities. It especially means a citywide tolerance for that which is different. In his book, Florida borrows from the so-called "Gay Index" developed by Gary Gates to point out that cities that are more accepting of homosexuals tend to attract more entrepreneurial businesses.

Florida took the idea a step further and created the "Bohemian Index," which measures the number of an area's artists, writers and performers. He showed a strong correlation between a high Bohemian Index and the ability of a city to attract **creative** businesses.

"**Creative**-minded people enjoy a mix of influences," Florida writes in his book. "They want to hear different kinds of music and try different kinds of food. They want to meet and socialize with people unlike themselves, trade views and spar over issues."

So for San Antonio to encourage this kind of **creative** economic development, the city's economic and cultural leadership would have to buy into the idea that some of the development is going to be nontraditional, to put it mildly.

Think of Austin's Sixth Street, for instance - a mix of restaurants, nightclubs and bawdy boutiques. It's one of that city's favorite landmarks and contributes not only directly to Austin's **economy** but also to the idea that Austin is a cool place to live.

Do you think Austin's city fathers gathered one day and decided to create Sixth Street? Of course not. But they also had the foresight not to prevent it, either.

San Antonio's economic elite is going to be naturally inclined to think of cultural development as haute couture, upscale dining and the fine arts. But it's going to have to at least tolerate the idea of gay bars, skateboard parks and seedy live-music venues. That's the kind of thing young, vibrant entrepreneurs seek in a city.

That's why it's fitting that Wednesday's event is called "Finding Ways." In the past, San Antonio hasn't found ways to nurture something like a Sixth Street. If it doesn't want to get left behind in the 21st century, it needs to start finding ways to do just that.

The Finding Ways event takes place Wednesday at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center's

Mission Room. It's free and open to the public. To register, call 207-6966.

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